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SLH Learning Brief

Learning in the Sanitation and Hygiene Sector

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This SLH Learning Brief summarises the key findings of a rapid topic exploration on how the sanitation and hygiene (S&H) sector learns horizontally as well as from communities. This is to understand the processes used, how the learning is being integrated into our work and to consider the ways of moving forward with the aim to strengthening learning processes within the sector. A longer learning paper accompanies this brief.

Scope of the review

The study involved a desk study of published and grey literature and 32 remote interviews with people working in organisations and institutions in Africa, Asia and elsewhere. This included people representing learning and training institutions, universities, non-governmental organisations, UN agencies, government, donors and funding bodies, networking organisations, communities of practice and freelancers/the private sector.

Box 1: Key takeaways

1. There are multiple ways that people working in the WASH sector learn – with hands-on learning-by-doing, learning by making mistakes, face-to-face training with action planning and follow-up and exchange visits and immersions, being of particular use.
2. There are multiple barriers to learning in the WASH sector – including the diverse backgrounds of sector personnel, turnover of staff, the existence of errors, myths, biases and blind spots in the way we operate

and learn, information overload and limited time and resources committed to learning.

3. More sharing and learning opportunities are needed related to good practices for sanitation and hygiene for local government and field level staff and more attention focused on learning from communities, including from people who may be most disadvantaged, as well as paying more attention to the most appropriate methodologies for this level of learning.
4. There is a need to build capacities and confidence on learning, documentation and sharing and in strengthening WASH sector network organisations to be able to facilitate learning and sharing more effectively.
5. For learning in the WASH sector and turning this learning into action at scale, it is important to ensure that government is engaged from the early stages, including from different levels – including senior levels to sub-district levels.

Findings

Levels of learning in the WASH sector

The WASH sector is very diverse, with a wide range of professionals with very different backgrounds and learning needs. There are also different levels where learning needs to occur. These vary in terms of: a) depth and level of detail; b) scale – learning by individuals, organisations, and sector-wide; c) by field and office-based workers; and d) sectoral as well as cross-sectoral.

How people learn best

The way people learn best varies from person to person, with a wide range of mechanisms through which they may learn. Figure 1 below provides an overview of the ways that people generally learn best.

The general consensus from the respondents in the rapid topic exploration, is that as a sector there is a need to consider a range of approaches appropriate to the needs and level of knowledge of different learners. Short briefing notes and videos are useful for raising general awareness, but more detailed guidance documents are needed once you start to implement. One respondent in this study noted that in their organisation 'older professionals and women were less likely to use online networks' and some people can find them overwhelming, discouraging their use.

A respondent in this study also highlighted it is important to consider '**what is effective and what is popular?**', as they may not be the same. For example, webinars and WhatsApp may be popular, but it is not clear how effective they are in resulting in improved action; whereas more direct and in-depth technical training, such as on how to site, design and construct pits in difficult ground conditions, may be less popular, but essential to ensure quality of programmes. Several respondents in this study noted that people's attention spans have reduced and there is a need to '**keep people engaged – it's like tap-dancing.**' Participatory methodologies and open learning are appreciated and popular and keep people engaged, but also pose risks that we can be 'sharing ignorance', so need moderation by facilitators with adequate knowledge and skills. One respondent in the study noted that '**our work needs a lot of common sense – we need to teach this**', and several people also observed that the level of technical competence in the sector has reduced. Both are needed. See Box 2 (p3) for discussion around navigating between differing points of view.

Learning from communities

People in communities are experts on their own situations, but we often don't do enough real listening and learning from community members, particularly from diverse community members, tending to focus more on the community leaders or those who are more vocal. We need to increase efforts to learn from people who may be most disadvantaged and more hidden and make sure that we 'Do No Harm' when we engage with people at community level. We also need to be better at being less extractive and giving updates and feedback to communities, whilst ensuring that this is also done in a safe and respectful way.

- 1. Commonly used methods for learning from communities:** focus group discussions, in-depth interviews; household surveys; transect walks and observations; urban consumer surveys/user satisfaction surveys; and GPS based survey mapping.
- 2. Methods that are sometimes used, but not as much as they could be:** include a number of participatory activities, such as community mapping; ranking; barrier analysis; gender and social inclusion analysis, etc.
- 3. Methods that are used less commonly, but with potential to be used more:** immersive research; child-led (or other-group-led) evaluations; community taught trainings; user-centred design; PhotoVoice; participatory video; and community score cards.

The methods in a) and b) can provide useful information for feeding back into programmes, but also have potential limitations, including related to the level of control that communities have over the direction of the learning. A few examples of participatory methods from group c), which came up during the rapid topic exploration and which are less commonly used by the WASH sector at present, but with potential for wider use, are shared in Table 1 (see p3).

How people learn most effectively

- Varies person to person
- Clearing desk
- No distractions
- Dedicated time
- Switch off computers, phones, internet



Figure 1: How people learn best Source: Authors' own.

Box 2: Navigating between practitioner views and researcher views

Practitioners struggle to make use of academic studies and papers and there is still divergence on understanding between some academics and practitioners on the relative value of different kinds of research and learning. Part of this revolves around differences of opinion on the relative value of qualitative and quantitative learning and research, and underlying this, what is considered acceptable ‘rigour?’

But there are also examples of good practice in collaboration, particularly in the humanitarian sector. For example, ELHRA and the Humanitarian Innovation Fund, brought together practitioners and academics; and there have also been examples of very positive collaboration between practitioners in the sector and particular academics. For example, academics at Tufts University have supported the WASH sector to unpack a number of practical challenges to develop simple solutions, such as how to effectively clean water containers and for spraying of chlorine in outbreak contexts (Lantagne n.d.; Yates et al. 2017).

Table 1: Less commonly used methods and approaches for learning with and from communities

METHOD/ TOOL	DESCRIPTION
Immersive research (Praxis et al. 2017)	A methodology based on the ‘reality check’ approach, where the researchers or practitioners spend some time living in a community and interacting with people. Useful for providing the ‘ah ha!’ moment for those involved of the realities of communities and their sanitation and hygiene practices, including learning from people who may be most disadvantaged. It’s an opportunity to ‘ground-truth’ (triangulate from the realities on the ground) the common beliefs of what is happening in the sector (Chambers 2017). For all community based activities, but also for particular for an approach like this where the researchers undertaking immersions stay in the communities and sleep in the homes of community members, particular attention needs to be placed on training them in the risks of doing harm to community members during this process, and how to prevent this, including their responsibilities to preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). Immersive research as an approach has been used by PRAXIS, WaterAid, IDS and WSSCC in three locations in India in recent years.
Child-led (or other-group-led) evaluations (Hughston, 2015)	This method has been supported by Plan International in Zimbabwe, Cambodia and Kenya. This approach puts the lead for the learning into the hands of a particular group within the community, in this case, children. The approaches used enabled the children to obtain feedback from their community and evaluate their ‘Building for Life’ programme and to make recommendations for going forward, whilst at the same time giving an opportunity for the children to gain skills and confidence. The approaches and tools need to be developed with the evaluator group in mind. In this case they used a number of visual tools, such as body mapping using body parts of different animals to represent feelings, confidence snails, ranking exercises and daisy exercises. It can lead to interesting findings that may not have been considered. This is an example of putting ‘nothing about us without us!’ into practice. Different groups of community members could undertake such evaluations, including for example, people with disabilities.
Community-taught-trainings	This method, supported by World Vision in Malawi, involves community members of different backgrounds being supported to document their experiences through different modes (document, video, role-play, etc). They then become the teachers for staff and partners who spend between one to three days in the community, meeting each community teacher and learning from them.
Community score-card (Mwanza and Gambi 2011)	Community score-cards are social accountability tools that can be used by communities themselves for monitoring local facilities, institutions or services, including for example, government administrative units such as district assemblies.
User-centred design (Blenkin and Ereira 2017)	This is being increasingly promoted for use in humanitarian contexts. It involves the key users in the design and feedback of prototypes for influencing subsequent designs. User-centred design was an approach used by OXFAM known as the Social Architecture Project (Farrington 2018), which aimed to support women to input into the design of WASH facilities in the Rohingya camps.
Storytelling: PhotoVoice (Bhakta 2020)	PhotoVoice is a method in which community members are trained to use a camera and asked to take photos to tell their story around a particular issue. It is their choice as to which issues they decide to prioritise, which can lead to interesting findings (Bhakta 2020). It has been used for research into menstrual hygiene for girls with intellectual disabilities in Nepal (Wilbur 2018), and for research into people with disabilities living with incontinence in Pakistan (Ansari 2017). However, it needs a lot of attention on the ethics of the process, and in particular around consent over use of photographs, including when the person involved takes photos of a third party.
Storytelling: Participatory video	Videos are made by community members telling stories and sharing their experiences and opinions. Community members can be supported to make their own short film. They take control of the subject matter and editing, and they may choose to roleplay scenarios. Care is also needed around the issue of consent for how the resulting video is used and to ensure that all people within the video have consented.

Learning peer to peer

A wide range of methods are currently used for learning peer-to-peer within the sector. A range of these methods have been highlighted in Figure 2 which follows.

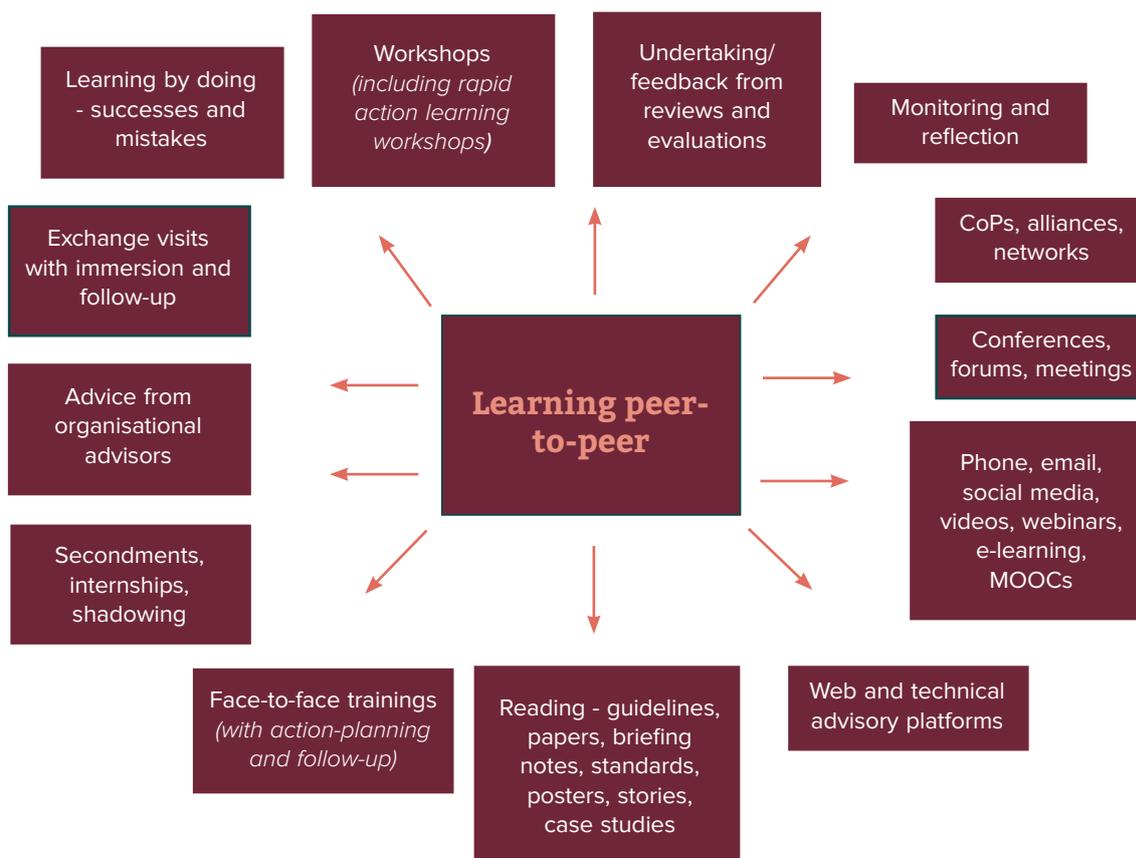


Figure 2: Methods and tools currently used for learning peer-to-peer. Source: Authors' own

Box 3 which follows provides examples of how some of these learning and sharing approaches are used in the sector.

Box 3: Examples of the learning and sharing approaches being used in the sector

- 1. Social media / WhatsApp groups:** There has been an explosion in the use of WhatsApp groups to support and encourage sharing and learning in sanitation programmes. Though the level of engagement is encouraging, more research is needed to unpack the usefulness of WhatsApp in sharing answers to persisting challenges implementers face, whether capacity is increased and whether it is resulting in changes on the ground. A respondent of the study highlighted that a WhatsApp group has proven very useful for sharing learning across the WASH sector in Nigeria, for example for the sharing of experiences on culture and traditions and how this impacts on success of open defecation free (ODF). However, a recent study in Indonesia reported that although learnings can be instantaneous they can be difficult to refer back to at later a date.
- 2. Mass Open On-line Courses (MOOCs):** Over 95,000 participants have enrolled in the EAWAG MOOC online courses in the series 'Sanitation, Water and Solid Waste for Development', including more than 50 per cent from low- and middle-income countries and a large number from the WASH sector.
- 3. Community of Practices (CoPs), alliances and networks:** These offer a range of opportunities for learning, each with different mechanisms and focus, particularly at general awareness-raising levels. An internal CoP within WaterAid on their Healthy Start Campaign (WaterAid n.d.) has proven very effective. The success of this CoP and the campaign was seen to partly be due to the clarity of this externally facing campaign towards governments, World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Health Assembly, with the provision of practical guidance on how country programmes could engage; as well as the skills of the person who facilitated the CoP.
- 4. Community of Practice for field workers:** A Core Facilitation Team (CFT) was established in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, to bring together hygiene promotion staff from across agencies to improve the quality and coherence of the hygiene promotion efforts (House 2019). The CFT is seen to have been effective, as the learning is facilitated in Bangla is flexible based on ongoing learning needs and has also been facilitated by a dynamic individual.
- 5. Institutionalising internal organisational sharing:** World Vision developed an approach which they called 'Learning

Labs', in which each person who was involved in a learning event, or undertook a learning process, was required to write what they have learnt, what they will do and what resources and support they need. Their supervisors follow-up after three months to review their progress.

- 6. Online forums and platforms:** Examples include a Yammer group focussing on School WASH, and the SuSanA (<https://www.susana.org/en/>). These were both seen to have benefits for some user groups and specific types of learning, but do also have limitations. Online professional directories are also valued, where people can go to seek professional support, such as 'KnowledgePoint' (Redr UK, <https://www.redr.org.uk/Training-Learning/KnowledgePoint>), which offers advice on a crowdsourcing basis.
- 7. Topic specific network:** A range of topic specific networks also exist such as the Container-based Sanitation Alliance (2019). This is considered to work well, possibly because its membership is limited in size, as not so many organisations specifically work on container-based sanitation, and it has a particular focus.

Turning learning and sharing to action at scale

There are multiple factors that affect whether learning can be turned into action at scale. Having access to information on new learning is just a first step.

- At the individual level:** There is a need to have the 'ah ha!' moment, where a person is triggered to understand the reason for a particular focus or approach, and then to assimilate the information and to learn from it. There is also a need to develop a commitment to act and to actually act to influence their organisations and others across the sector.
- For decision-makers:** There is a need for the decision-makers to be convinced and then to prioritise the issue. It then needs to be integrated into systems, budgets to be allocated and for the effectiveness of the activities and processes to be monitored.
- At the sectoral level:** There is a need for a critical mass of champions who are keeping the issue on the table. It needs to be integrated into policies and strategies and for guidance to be prepared. Capacity building is also needed at all levels, so that people have the confidence and capacity to act.

Opportunities for speeding up the process of turning learning into action at scale, include:

- Continued learning, iterative feedback into programmes and systems, strengthening and structuring learning systems and feedback loops and making better use of M&E systems.
- Greater involvement of key government actors at district level and below, as well as senior decision-makers from earlier stages.

Example

'Activities cannot be done centrally – they are implemented from Local Government Authorities. If they are capacitated, they can go ahead and do them in the villages' (key informant interview [KII]).

Rapid Action Learning workshops facilitated by WSSCC and the Sanitation Learning Hub have been used at National, State, Sub-State and District level in India to support the strengthening of the Swachh Bharat Mission (Chambers et al. 2018). The majority of participants were local government staff, who implement the programme, as well as decision-makers who can sign-off on plans made.

- Effective and coherent collaboration by agencies supporting governments, to prevent duplication of efforts and confusing governments with multiple differences in approach.

- Supporting collaboration by diverse actors and government leadership on learning.

Example

A National Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) Coalition has been established in Tanzania by a wide range of interest groups interested in learning and promoting improved support for MHH across Tanzania.¹ It has more than 170 members across the country. It includes representatives from government agencies, UN agencies, the private sector, NGOs and research institutions as well as a number of Parliamentarians. They collaborate on different advocacy and learning activities including engaging with and encouraging the media. On behalf of the MHH Coalition, UNICEF has recently supported the President's Office for Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) with funds for a nation-wide research into MHH in Tanzania. This has been undertaken by the National Institute for Medical Research, which is part of the Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children. It will be used to inform evidence-based MHH programming and for major advocacy efforts with a wide range of stakeholders in the coming future.

- Linking political advocacy efforts with incentives for action.
- Long-term partnerships and engaging with local government networks and national WASH networks.
- Support for the development of the enabling environment to strengthen learning.
- Building capacities at individual, institutional, private sector and sectoral levels and supporting training of trainers (ToTs) for facilitation and participatory learning skills.

Example

Under the Global Sanitation Fund, WSSCC also supported a number of teams from different countries to visit Madagascar to learn about the Follow-up-Mandona (FUM) Approach (Global Sanitation Fund/Fonds d'Appui pour l'Assainissement 2016) for following up on the progress of communities in attaining open defecation free status. They stayed for 3-4 weeks of intense work, rather than just a few days, and they were followed up when they returned to their countries, rather than just being left to their own devices. Several respondents in this rapid topic exploration noted that they saw improvements at scale following this learning opportunity.

Establishing the effectiveness of learning and how it has been turned into action at scale

In relation to measuring the effectiveness of learning and turning the learning into action, a range of methods are being used. These include those that: a) involve the mapping of activities and feedback on activities; b) look at the reach of outputs; and c) look at the uptake and use of outputs, outcomes and impacts. The methods are quite diverse, such as: citation tracking of publications, quantitative data on download of materials and accessing of webpages, to stories of change, contribution analysis, user outcome / impact surveys, outcome mapping and evaluations.

The need to focus more on outcomes rather than outputs was noted, and some progress has already been made in this direction. However, it was also acknowledged that it is difficult to assess effectiveness of learning from specific activities, i.e. the outcomes and impacts, because learning is a process and happens over time, with different opportunities for learning building on each other and contributing to the overall process of change. It can also be difficult to follow up with people at a later date, sometime after the learning activity has been completed, due to turnover of staff. Effective feedback loops are needed between monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and programming, but this does not always happen. In addition, how the learning translates into policy and practice, is even harder to pin down.

'The ways in which practices and policies change are not simple... many political and personal factors combine to influence the uptake of evidence into changed policy and practice. It is more likely that change will result from a 'critical mass' of research on a topic, and perhaps form a particular 'tipping point', than from an isolated research project' (Carter et al. 2014: 2)

Some M&E is also seen as not being useful for implementers and being more for the benefit of donors and politicians wanting to prove success. Some felt that too much time is spent on M&E to the detriment of programming, with a question being asked as to whether as a sector we are suffering from 'obsessive measurement disorder?' (Pasanen 2019). It was also observed that we are often not realistic about what we should be expected to achieve in limited timeframes, and then not being satisfied or critical when over-ambitious objectives and targets are not met.

'Time frame – we are learning what works and need to be realistic if we have 3, 4, 5 years funding. Rarely do we see plans of greater than 5 years and being realistic about what you can achieve in this time. 5 years is both a long time and not very long' (KII).

Barriers and challenges for learning

With the opportunities there are also many barriers and challenges to learning. For example:

1. The diverse backgrounds of personnel, the attitudes of staff, relationships to donors and attitudes of management and human resource personnel, which may bias who gets opportunities for learning.
2. The turnover of staff, lack of structured learning opportunities and limitations in commitment to learning and to prioritising time to learn from communities.

'There are major barriers related to perceptions to do with time – actual or perceived time – practitioners feel they have none to spare. When they have this perception, all learning gets dropped and engagement with the community is rubbish. Corners are cut and we

end up with secondary problems' (KII)

3. The use of jargon and language, as well as differences in confidence and ability in writing and reading.

Example

Much learning is documented and shared in English, which biases opportunity for people who do not speak English or where it is a second language. In response, WaterAid has increased its commitment to improving access to documents and regularly makes sure that they are available in three or four core languages – English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. They have also started translating draft reports into French, to allow French speakers to contribute to review of documents and they also support workshops in West and Central Africa in dual languages with dual screens and parallel translation.

4. Gaps in accessibility to information for people with disabilities, ethical risks and risks of doing harm.

Example

In Nepal, a team from the London School and Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and partners developed specific visual aids for MHM for girls who have learning difficulties. This included a doll and pictures (Wilbur 2018). These were used to explain information and also for two-way communication.

A national study in Bhutan to investigate who has been left behind in the national sanitation and hygiene programme (Choden and House 2019), integrated training on Doing No Harm into the training for the study team.

5. An unwillingness to share on things that have not gone well or on what are perceived as 'failures', with particular concern about admitting these in front of donors.

Example

'People are highly territorial – I often hear people bad mouth others. Knowledge management is also often focussed on trying to sell ourselves and linked to the individuals, rather than being real. These factors then also restrict willingness to share on failures.' (KII)

A positive effort to increase commitment to learn from failures has been the development of the "Nakuru Accord: Failing better in the WASH Sector" (Leeds University 2018). This aims to inspire people to publicly commit to sharing their failures and learning from one another. In July 2020, it had 212 sector professionals, 11 organisations and one event signed up.

6. An enabling environment that is not supportive of prioritising learning and gaps in political will.
7. Errors, myths, biases and blind spots in the way we learn, as well as the tension between qualitative and quantitative approaches; with continued divergence between some academics and practitioner's over the value of different kinds of research and learning approaches, and understanding of what is 'acceptable rigour.'

Example

Examples of sources of errors and myths include those from power and personal interests, ego, pride and status, propagating findings that conveniently confirm beliefs and extrapolating out of context. Biases and blind spots may be due to 'strategic ignorance' when we do not wish to know something, or due to 'tactics', such as shelving a report, keeping it confidential, editing it, or limiting its circulation. Biases can also occur due to spatial focus, such as prioritising visits to communities near to the 'tarmac' or the 'airport', or only going on visits during certain seasons. There may also be diplomatic biases, in being reluctant to broach sensitive subjects (Chambers 2017).

8. Uneven opportunities and resources and variations in the capacity of facilitators and trainers.
9. There are also gaps in the sharing of learning across agencies, with more regular sharing within organisations, and there are risks that sector actors 'follow fashions' when choosing what to learn. For example, by learning and acting on particular issues, because the big players (Gates, the World Bank etc.) are focussing on them, rather than learning what is coming up from the realities on the ground.
10. Huge amounts of information also pose major challenges, as well as some concern over the perception of the proliferation of learning mechanisms. For example, the existence of a number of online forums, sometimes where similar issues are discussed, and also because of the time it takes to engage with such forums, even if they focus on different issues. There is also a resistance to reading, which limits the potential impact of sharing through documentation form.

Recommendations for the sector

The following are recommendations for strengthening learning within the WASH sector:

Strengthening learning and sharing processes:

1. Share experiences of how learning happens within our organisations, identifying and sharing examples of good practice – in particular, how to systematise reflection, learning and turning this into action.
2. Continuously reflect on how we learn most effectively and pay more attention to the most effective methods, to strengthen the quality of learning opportunities.
3. Pay more attention to how to learn better from communities and in particular from people who may be most vulnerable, marginalised or otherwise disadvantaged, using methods that build their capacity and confidence to be willing and able to speak. This includes on how to 'Do No Harm' and trialling less commonly used participatory methodologies, to establish how learning from communities can become more effective.

Improving the quality of learning processes:

4. Encourage sector actors to be more open about challenges and learning from things that did not work as planned/learning from failures.
5. Reflect on our own common errors, myths, biases and blind spots and consider how to reduce or minimise negative impacts from them.

6. Increase the diversity of opportunities for learning and contributions to learning, considering the barriers that different people may face in being able to take part, including for people of different genders, age, backgrounds and for people with disabilities.
7. Review M&E systems to consider how useful they are for learning for programmes and strengthening the evidence base. In conjunction with donors, consider if they can be modified to increase usefulness for ongoing learning for programmes, and turning this learning into action.
8. Reflect on different kinds of rigour and the value of qualitative versus quantitative approaches, bringing together people supporting the different kinds of research and learning on the spectrum, for increased mutual understanding and respect of different methods for different purposes.

Building capacities and confidence for learning:

9. Increase attention to supporting opportunities for learning for local government and field staff, who tend to have less opportunities than people working at headquarters, nationally or internationally.
10. Build capacities and confidence in how to learn, document and share learning, particularly of staff working in the field and at local government levels.
11. Consider if there could be opportunities for the sector to develop some form of accreditation for WASH sector staff, with basic core competencies and a need for continued professional development targets to encourage on-going learning as core to the WASH sector's work.
12. Consider if there are opportunities to link more with MSc and PhD students (particularly from low- and middle-income countries, in their own countries and also when studying internationally).
13. To also strengthen existing network or learning organisations to be able to facilitate learning and sharing more effectively, including through training of facilitators and researchers, or establishment and management of resource centres or platforms.

Turning learning into action:

14. Consider how the process of learning and using that learning to turn it into action can happen in an iterative manner and at increased speed and effectiveness.
15. Increase collaboration and coherence of support to government by external agencies, particularly for the development of updated and new strategies.
16. Increase leadership for learning by and engagement with government at different levels, including at both local government and senior decision-making levels.

Endnotes

¹ Case study documented as part of a review on MHM by WSSCC in 2020.

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